

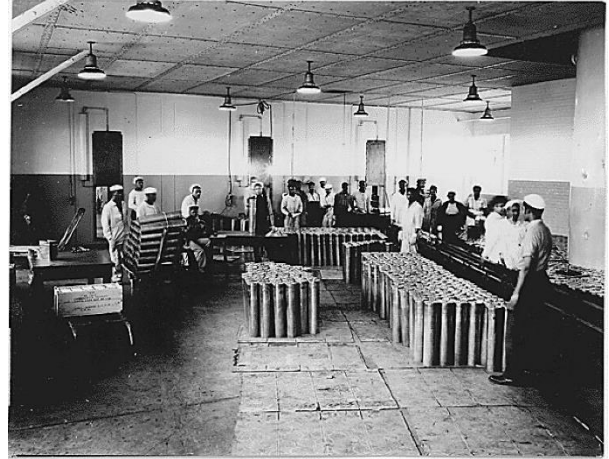
Nebraska and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

As World War II began, most of Nebraska was still coping with the effects of the Dust Bowl, including drought, erosion, and population loss. Despite this fact, agriculture was one of Nebraska's key contributions to the war. The Cornhusker State also became the site of numerous Army airfields, ordnance plants, prisoner of war camps, and other facilities that were vital to the war effort. New military facilities and industrial production that sprung up almost overnight changed the nature of Nebraska's small-town life and regional economies.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

The war years saw Nebraska's farm income, largely from corn and wheat, increase significantly despite severe labor shortages. In 1942, the state brought in \$496 million dollars, the highest it had been in twenty years. The growth, spurred on by advancements in farm mechanization, continued in 1943, when the state experienced higher than usual levels of rainfall, leading to a bountiful harvest and farm income totaling \$653 million dollars.¹ In addition to food production, Nebraska corn was used to produce ethyl alcohol that was then made into synthetic rubber, addressing natural rubber shortages during the war. The tires that were manufactured from Nebraska-made synthetic rubber were used in the D-Day invasions at Normandy.²



African American enlisted Navy service members on the ammunition load line at the US Naval Ammunition Depot in Hastings, Nebraska. Credit: National Archives

Throughout these successful farm years, the federal government took over 129,000 acres of farmland in order to build airfields, POW camps, and other vital war time infrastructure.³ Many of these installations were in or near Omaha, the state's largest city located on the western bank of the Missouri River. Kiewit and Sons Construction, Gilmore Engineering, Omaha Steel Works, and Layne-Western Construction all secured government contracts.⁴ The Martin Bombing Plant, located in Bellevue (about 10 miles south of Omaha), was one of Nebraska's most significant contributions to the war effort. The plant, completed on January 1, 1942, was owned by the government and operated by the Baltimore-based Glenn L. Martin Company.⁵

The Martin Bombing Plant produced over 1,500 B-26 Marauder medium bombers, and toward the end of the war, it produced 500 B-29 Superfortresses. The plant also made one of the most famous aircrafts in World War II history, the Enola Gay, the B-29 Superfortress that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The plant received the Army-Navy "E" award for operating twelve consecutive months of on-

¹ Ronald C Naugle, John J Montag, and James C Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," *History of Nebraska*, 4th ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014) 275.

² John Carter, "[Postscript: Nebraska Corn Helps Win the War](#)," *Nebraska History* 87 (2006): 192

³ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 275.

⁴ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 45.

⁵ George A Larson, "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant: The Glenn L Martin-Nebraska Company," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 32.

time production.⁶ The plant also supported an ecosystem of companies that filled sub-contracts. Nearby plants run by Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company and the Chrysler Corporation made components that went into the Martin Company's planes.

Kearney joined forces with two other Nebraska cities, Grand Island and Hastings, to form the Central Nebraska Defense Council, to vie for wartime production sites and military installations. The construction of a new army airfield in Kearney created thousands of jobs. Kearney primarily conducted final safety inspections for planes and medical (vaccination and overall fitness) and legal (will writing) inspections for crews headed overseas. During the war, tens of thousands of men were processed at Kearney.⁷ Grand Island was selected as the site of the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant (COP). The Quaker Oats Company, known for its efficiency and financial stability, managed the plant that opened in late 1942. Over COP's three years in operation, the plant employed over 15,000 workers.⁸

Hastings experienced a significant economic boom when the Navy announced that it planned to build a \$45 million ammunition plant in the city. To facilitate the expansive building project, the government purchased 48,753 acres from 232 landowners.⁹ Construction began at the plant, known as the Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot (HNAD), in July 1942, and production began a little over a year later.¹⁰ When completed, the depot included 2,200 buildings, warehouses, bunkers, and hundreds of igloo-shaped explosives storage magazines. At its peak, the plant employed nearly 10,000 civilian workers and military personnel and was one of the largest defense installations of its kind in the United States. At one point in the war, HNAD supplied 40 percent of the navy's ammunition.¹¹

Nebraska was also the location of twelve air bases or satellite locations: Ainsworth, Alliance, Bruning, Fairmont, Fort Crook, Grand Island, Harvard, Kearney, Lincoln, McCook, Scottsbluff, and Scribner. Lincoln Army Air Field, located near the state capital, was built in 1942. The airfield provided technical training for mechanics, basic training for aviation cadets, and was a staging area for bombardment groups. As the war wound down, the airfield served as a separation processing center for servicemen returning home.¹²

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Over the course of the 1940s the statewide population barely changed, increasing less than one percent, in contrast with other U.S. states that saw large gains in population. While the urban population increased and diversified, the rural proportion dropped to 54.2% of the state from approximately 60% in the 1930s.¹³ Omaha's population climbed 12.2% over the course of the 1940s, and the population of smaller cities and towns sometimes exploded due to the construction of wartime installations. The population of Sarpy County, home to Bellevue and the Martin Bombing Plant, grew

⁶ Larson, "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant," 32, 37, 41.

⁷ Todd L Petersen, "Kearney, Nebraska, and the Kearney Army Air Field in World War II," *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 118-19, 121.

⁸ Tracy Lynn Wit, "The Social and Economic Impact of World War II Munitions Manufacture on Grand Island, Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 71 (1990): 151.

⁹ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 275.

¹⁰ Wit, "The Social and Economic Impact of World War II Munitions," 151.

¹¹ Beverly Russell, "World War II Boomtown: Hastings and the Naval Ammunition Depot," *Nebraska History* 76 (1995): 76.

¹² "[Lincoln Army Air Field/Air Force Base](#)," *Explore Nebraska History*, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, "1950 Census, Volume 1: Nebraska."

44.8% during the 1940s. By January 1945, the plant had 13, 217 employees. Like many major wartime production facilities, the Martin Bombing Plant was like a miniature city with a range of job classifications: administrative, clerical, and factory workers, as well as tailors, guards, writers, photographers, cooks, chauffeurs, upholsterers, and more.¹⁴

Women experienced unprecedented job opportunities in Nebraska's heavy industry during the war. For example, over forty percent of the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant employees were women, who fulfilled roles in maintenance, the guard force, on the loading line, and in the office. Women were also paid the same rate as men for the jobs they performed, and working mothers had access to a childcare center. COP also employed 190 Jamaicans late in the war through a special agreement with the British government. The men lived in segregated barracks, ate separate meals, and had their own recreational facilities. Additionally, the plant hired disabled men and women, including veterans who were wounded in World War I.¹⁵

To address farm worker shortages brought on by men leaving for military service, Nebraska recruited temporary Mexican laborers from the Bracero Program to harvest and process sugar beets, as well as 1,000 incarcerated Japanese Americans. Nebraska farmers also relied heavily on German and Italian prisoners of war. There were three POW base camps and twenty smaller satellite camps that were used to move smaller gangs of POWs out into the countryside where they would be closer to work sites. During the war, approximately 12,000 prisoners of war were housed in Nebraska camps.¹⁶

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Many Nebraska communities, which were largely racially homogenous, struggled with the diversity that the wartime home front brought to their small towns and cities. Incarcerated Japanese Americans brought in to help with Nebraska harvests were met with suspicion and racial prejudice. The Governor of Nebraska, Dwight Griswold, insisted that Japanese Americans should be placed in heavily guarded, segregated camps. The University of Nebraska, located in Lincoln, took a different stance and enrolled more than one hundred Japanese American students, the third most of any university during the war. The students, who were incarcerated at sites across the American West, were allowed to leave the camps to enroll in American universities, though many universities would not admit Nisei students due to racial prejudices prevalent during the war.¹⁷

Kearney, which had a population of 9,643 in 1940, had no racial minorities before the airfield changed the demographics of the city.¹⁸ As Black workers and military personnel moved to Kearney, they faced hostilities and segregation.¹⁹ This discrimination was evident in the community centers established to serve service men. The USO club for white soldiers was well-received and over 500 white women signed up to serve as hostesses. However, when the USO opened a service center for Black troops, Kearney's white residents protested vehemently. There was significant debate about where the center should be located, and the city couldn't find enough Black women to serve as hostesses at the segregated facility.²⁰

¹⁴ Larson, "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant," 39.

¹⁵ Wit, "The Social and Economic Impact of World War II Munitions," 154, 156, 158-59.

¹⁶ "The Home Front," *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 196.

¹⁷ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 270.

¹⁸ Petersen, "Kearney, Nebraska, and the Kearney Army Air Field," 119.

¹⁹ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 277.

²⁰ Petersen, "Kearney, Nebraska, and the Kearney Army Air Field," 122, 124.

A similar trajectory happened in Hastings when the HNAD drastically altered the racial makeup of the town. Before the plant was announced, less than 1% of Hastings' residents were racial minorities. In November 1942, one hundred Chippewa and Lakota men arrived to aid in the plant's construction, followed shortly thereafter by several hundred Black sailors, who eventually composed 15% of the plant's workforce.²¹ Many white residents of Hastings fought against equal accommodations for the non-white workers and soldiers and spoke disparagingly about them in the local newspaper. Segregated housing and recreational facilities were flash points in the community throughout the war.²²

Life on the Home Front

Nebraska residents eagerly participated in war bond drives, scrap collecting, Red Cross volunteerism, and civil defense initiatives, such as blackouts and daylight raids. One of the state's most famous home front locations was the North Platte Canteen. A group of local women established the Canteen after receiving incorrect information that the Nebraska National Guard would be making a quick stop in North Platte on December 17, 1941. The women made cakes, cookies, sandwiches, and coffee. However, when they went to meet the men, they were surprised to see the Kansas National Guard instead, who were quite appreciative. The Canteen continued to operate every day through April 1946. Women and girls from 125 communities in Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado volunteered, often serving more than twenty trains and 3,000 to 5,000 men and women in the armed forces each day. Aside from a \$5 check from FDR, the Canteen did not receive any outside funding to maintain the operation.²³

After the War

In the wake of the war, Nebraska's population continued to shift from rural to urban and suburban communities, while farms continued to decrease in number but increase in size. Major defense sites, like the Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot, were later transitioned to educational, government, and civilian uses. Segregation and discrimination that stemmed from the state's changing racial and ethnic demographics during the war contributed to the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s. In the early 1970s, violence against Native peoples in Nebraska erupted, which played a part in galvanizing the American Indian Movement.

Places of World War II History

- **Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot:** Located in Nebraska's designated World War II City, the Hastings NAD was the largest inland facility of its type, supplying 40% of the Navy's ammunition with 10,000 employees working around the clock. Today, visitors can tour the Hastings Museum to see examples of ammunition and other items from the facility.
- **Martin Bombing Plant:** Located south of Omaha, the 15,000 worker plant made B-26 and B-29 bombers, including the *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar*, which dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By Julie Huddleston, supervised by Dr. Matt Basso. Adapted by Dr. Nicole Martin, a consulting historian with the National Park Service in partnership with the National Council on Public History.

²¹ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 277.

²² Russell, "World War II Boomtown," 78.

²³ Naugle, Montag, and Olson, "Nebraska and World War II," 279. Donald Hickey, Susan A. Wunder, and John R. Wunder *Nebraska Moments* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 272.